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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000028

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TAGS: ECON PGOV PREL SCUL IR

SUBJECT: IRAN CONVICTS ECONOMIST FOR ACCEPTING FOREIGN FUNDING

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office - Dubai, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary. Iranian economist and journalist Ali Farahbakhsh was arrested at Tehran airport after returning from an economic conference in Thailand in November 2006, according to Iranian press. An opposition blog said he was "located" in Evin Prison 40 days after his arrest. He was accused of espionage, investigated, tried, and finally sentenced to three years in prison for receiving \$2,300 from outside agencies - an amount that Farahbakhsh reportedly claims was paid to him to cover his trip expenses. A close IRPO contact, who claims to be a good friend and former university classmate of Farahbakhsh, said that Farahbakhsh is not a political activist. He is, said the contact, an economist who speaks his mind - but one that maybe should "think twice" before actually sending his analysis to print. IRPO Dubai recommends that Farahbakhsh's case be included in any upcoming press statements on human rights or press freedom in Iran. At the same time, we recommend against singling out his case or inferring that he is a political activist. To our knowledge, it was likely his frank economic criticism of government policy that landed him in trouble. It is also troubling for our own exchange programs that Iranians are being prosecuted for accepting funds for international travel. End Summary.

The criminal case against Farahbakhsh

2.(U) Ali Farahbakhsh, an economist and journalist for now banned reformist dailies Yas-e Now and Sharq, was arrested in Tehran airport after returning from an economic conference reportedly organized by an NGO in Thailand in November 2006. (Note: Amnesty International reported that he attended a conference on government and the media, while other sources specify it was an economic conference. No further information is known. Endnote). Farahbakhsh was detained without charge and his family was reportedly not informed of his whereabouts for several weeks. On January 22 Advar News released a portion of a letter that the wife and parents of Farahbakhsh sent to Judiciary head Hashemi Shahrudi. The letter accused the Judiciary of keeping Farahbakhsh in solitary confinement for 44 days before transferring him to a general cell, despite the fact that he had not been charged with any crime, and that he had not been given access to an attorney. The letter also claimed that Farahbakhsh developed serious digestive problems and "bleeding of the stomach" due to the "unpleasant mode of interrogation." Farahbakhsh was, according to the family, threatening to go on a

hunger strike unless he was given an explanation for his detention - something that the family was deeply concerned about due to the seriousness of his health condition.

3.(U) Less than two weeks later, on January 31, the Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA) announced that Farahbakhsh had an attorney and was charged with espionage for passing intelligence to foreigners after taking part in a conference abroad. On April 23, an opposition blog claimed that although Farahbakhsh was originally accused of espionage, ultimately he was sentenced to three years in prison for receiving \$2,300 from outside "agencies" - an amount Farahbakhsh says was paid to him to cover his travel expenses to Thailand.

Personal insight

¶4. (C) A reliable IRPO contact, who claims to be a good friend and former university classmate of Farahbakhsh when both were studying economics, said that Farahbakhsh has never been politically active. According to the contact, Farahbakhsh is an economist by training and writes articles purely from an economic perspective. The contact asserted that Farahbakhsh perhaps did not exercise enough self-censorship and thought he tended to be too outspoken in his articles. A search of OSC yielded a 2003 editorial in Yas-e Now in which Farahbakhsh outlined political hurdles standing in the way of executing Iran's third economic plan, highlighting that Iran's political system results in "extensive lack of coordination in making decisions and in implementing plans."

5.(C) Comment. IRPO Dubai recommends that the next time the Department makes a call for greater respect for human rights in Iran, Farahbakhsh's case could be included, in addition to other cases. We do not recommend spotlighting his case alone, given that he is apparently being prosecuted for accepting funds to travel to a foreign conference, an accusation that could be leveled at our exchange program participants. We also recommend

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taking care not to infer that we see him as a political activist. As far as we can tell, it was his frank criticism of Iranian economic policy that landed him in trouble with the government, something Iran could certainly use more of.
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